

How to Get Your Baby to Sleep through the Night

Unless you're one of a lucky few, you can forget about getting anything close to six to eight hours of uninterrupted snoozing for at least the first three months of your baby's life. Infants have disorganized or fragmented sleep. That means that newborns don't sleep for long periods the way we do (or did), nor do they necessarily do most of their sleeping at night. They also require two or three nighttime feedings, since their tiny stomachs can't hold enough to keep them full for long periods. Though some babies are capable of sleeping through the night as early as 6 weeks old, for many it won't happen until age 4 to 6 months. By then most babies should be learning to fall asleep on their own in their own crib, without being rocked, nursed, or otherwise coddled into slumber. By 9 months, most can sleep a full 12 hours.

Even if your baby is younger than 5 months, you can start helping her develop healthy sleep habits. A good idea is to minimize stimulation prior to bedtime. A warm bath, a book, or a song can help a child wind down. Other simple approaches are to cut down on your baby's napping and to move her bedtime to a later hour.

All of us go back and forth between deep sleep and light sleep throughout the night. During light sleep we partially wake up, but usually turn over and put ourselves back to sleep. Some infants have a difficult time learning how to do this. If most of your nights are still being interrupted once your baby reaches 5 or 6 months — if she still isn't sleeping for six- to eight-hour stretches or can't get herself back to sleep when she awakens — consider trying one of these techniques. Each method has its proponents and detractors, but there's a good chance that one could work well for you and your baby.

FERBERIZING

Probably the most popular getting-baby-to-sleep technique is the Ferber method, named for its creator, Richard Ferber, M.D., director of the Center for Pediatric Sleep Disorders at Children's Hospital, in Boston. It's based on the notion that babies make associations with falling asleep, whether at bedtime or after waking in the middle of the night. So if you routinely rock your child until he falls asleep or allow him to fall asleep while breastfeeding or having a bottle, he'll come to rely on these things in order to go to sleep and will want them repeated when he wakes in the middle of the night. The trick is to teach him to learn to fall asleep by himself in his crib when you first put him down for the night. Once he learns this, the middle of the night awakenings generally take care of themselves. Here's how it works:

1. Put your baby in his crib when he is drowsy but still awake. Say good night, and leave the room. If he starts to cry let him - for about 5 minutes. Then go into the room, comfort him briefly without picking him up, and leave. If he cries again, wait 10 minutes before going in, then 15 minutes, until he falls asleep.

The point of going in is to reassure your baby that you still exist and to reassure you that he's okay.

2. Repeat the ritual - with the same timed intervals used at his bedtime - every time he wakes in the night.

3. Each subsequent night add an additional 5 minutes to the first interval. For example, the second night, start by waiting 10 minutes before going in, then 15 on the third night.

PROS: Over the course of three to seven days - it seldom takes longer than this - the baby learns to associate being in his crib with falling asleep. He also learns that crying won't get his parents to pick him up. And a few nights of tears in an otherwise loving environment won't have any lasting effect on your baby.

CONS: This method isn't for the fainthearted, since you have to be able to handle hearing your infant cry, sometimes for long periods. But unlike simply letting the baby cry until he falls asleep, you go in to his room to calm him at prescribed intervals. You may have to repeat the entire process when the baby is older, since some will experience relapses.

SCHEDULED AWAKENINGS

This technique is based on altering a baby's sleep habits by waking her at prescribed times. Here's the idea:

1. For one week, keep track of the times the baby wakes each night. Then, try to beat her to the punch. If she wakes at 12 and 4 AM, for instance, go in and wake her at 11:45 and 3:45 and rock her or do whatever you normally do.

2. Day by day, extend the waking times in 15-minute increments — back to 12 and 4 AM, then to 12:15 and 4:15, and so on. She should stop waking on her own and instead wait for her parent, who has become her alarm clock.

3. As you add 15-minute increments between wakings, she learns to sleep for longer periods of time. Eventually you phase out the wakings altogether and find that your baby is sleeping through the night.

PROS: For infants who routinely awaken at predictable times during the night, the scheduled-awakenings method can be a gentler alternative to Ferberizing — there's often less crying and parents feel a sense of control, since they're in charge of when the baby wakes up.

CONS: Parents have a hard time bringing themselves to actually wake the baby. Some sleep experts are adamantly opposed to this method and point out that there's little proof that it's effective. They argue that an infant's waking schedule is too varied for this technique to be effective. Another glitch is that this approach takes a while — as long as three or four weeks.

REINFORCING SLEEP RHYTHMS

The gist of this preventive method is that you never let your baby (of 4 months or older) become overtired, because being too fatigued may be the root of the sleep problems. Instead, you

anticipate your infant's natural sleepiness and put him down — at naptime and at bedtime — accordingly. The approach works as follows:

1. Keep intervals of wakefulness brief when a baby's about 4 months old: every one to two hours put him down for a nap. Infants who are older than that can handle longer wakeful periods — put them down for naps two or three times a day. Any soothing bedtime ritual can be used, but avoid letting your baby nap on the run, such as in the car or stroller.
2. Anticipate when your baby will be sleepy. This may take a while.
3. Never wake a sleeping baby. Most babies (between 5 and 12 months) will take two or three naps of one to two hours a day, but longer naps will have no negative effect on nighttime sleep. The better a child sleeps during the day, the easier it is for him to fall asleep at night.
4. Set an early bedtime. Babies need to go to bed between 6 and 8 PM, depending on their nap schedule.

PROS: It's argued that with this approach, sleep problems won't develop and you'll never need to resort to Ferberizing or other techniques; all you'll need to do is predict when your baby will get tired and then let him sleep.

CONS: Never letting a baby become overtired and never waking him up can be harder than it sounds. While this approach may be less wrenching than some of the others, it's not a short-term quick fix: In order to work, you have to stick with it. If your infant is waking in the middle of the night, this method will only bring about slow, gradual change.

THE FAMILY BED

This method — in which children share a bed with their parents — is common in many cultures and is part of a child-rearing philosophy known in the U.S. as "attachment parenting." It's a sleeping style more than a technique for getting a baby to sleep well. This approach — not to be confused with allowing your child to come into bed with you once in a while — calls for sharing the bed most nights.

PROS: Proponents of cosleeping believe that the feeling of security the baby gets when she wakes up next to her mom and dad helps her go back to sleep right away. If the mom is breastfeeding, she barely has to open her eyes to feed her baby.

CONS: Many sleep experts offer warnings about this approach. You'll have to forget about having any privacy. And there is the possibility that a parent will roll over on top of the baby. A family bed needs to be large enough to accommodate everybody comfortably and shouldn't have a soft mattress, fluffy pillows, or a comforter, which could suffocate the baby. Also, you should never consume alcohol or take any medications that may make you drowsy. And there's the issue of when to stop inviting your child into bed with you, because at some point she's going to have to learn to sleep alone — which means that one of the above techniques may eventually be necessary.

With any sleep strategy, it's in everybody's best interest to start sooner rather than later — certainly by 18 months. If your baby continues to have problems falling asleep and staying asleep, talk it over with your pediatrician. While getting your baby to sleep through the night can take some effort and willpower, if you keep up with it, everyone will rest easy.